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The ‘Thing’ in Martin Heidegger and Georges Bataille: Method, Ritual and Prostitution

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Article Abstract

This article juxtaposes two of the most influential thinkers of the previous century, Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger: my overarching claim will be that a contrastive approach allows a better understanding of two central dynamics within their work. First, I show that both were deeply troubled by a certain methodological anxiety; namely, that the practice of writing might distort and deform their insights. By employing a comparative strategy, I suggest that we can gain a better understanding of the very specific form this fear takes in them: in each case, it is articulated and justified in terms of the ‘chose’ or ‘Ding’ (‘thing’) or the ‘objet’ or ‘Objekt’ (‘object’). Second, I argue that close textual comparison allows us to identify an important, new dimension in their reactions to this shared anxiety: the thing or object which was originally the site of the anxiety gradually becomes, through series of ontological and textual shifts, the solution to it. I track this transformation across a range of case studies including Heidegger’s later work on the term ‘Ding’ and Bataille’s treatment of prostitution. I close by indicating how these results might create avenues for further research.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article brings together a pair of thinkers who have exercised enormous influence over a range of domains, from philosophy to literary theory to poetry, from the 1920s onwards: Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger. My overarching claim will be that a contrastive approach allows a better understanding of two central dynamics within their work. First, I show that both were deeply troubled by a certain methodological anxiety; namely, that the practice of writing might distort and deform their insights.ⁱ By employing a contrastive strategy, I suggest that we can gain a better understanding of the very specific form this anxiety takes: in each case, it is articulated and justified in terms of the ‘chose’ or ‘Ding’ (‘thing’) or the ‘objet’ or ‘Objekt’ (‘object’).ⁱⁱ Second, by comparing Heidegger and Bataille, we are able to identify an important, new dimension in their reactions to this shared anxiety. As I discuss, both the authors themselves and their main commentators typically present these reactions in stylistic terms: faced by the threat that writing might betray them, each attempts to develop a disruptive, hybrid form of discourse – as exemplified in texts such as Bataille’s *L’Impossible* (*The Impossible*) or Heidegger’s *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (*Contributions to Philosophy: Of the Event*). I absolutely agree that this constitutes one important aspect of their response. But it is not the only one, and by bringing together the two authors, we can identify another: the thing or object which was originally the site of the anxiety gradually becomes, through series of ontological and textual shifts, *the solution to it*. I contend that a comparative strategy allows us to track this transformation in a way that illuminates both authors: I use a range of case studies to support this claim, including Heidegger’s later work on the term ‘Ding’ and Bataille’s treatment of prostitution.

The structure of the article is as follows. I begin in section 2 by introducing the common anxiety and tracing the specific form it takes in the two authors. In section 3 I outline the standard narrative as to how these authors respond to that anxiety. In section 4, I set out my supplementary proposal. This is not intended to displace the dominant narrative; instead my aim is to pinpoint a further dimension to their work and their methodology. I close in section 5 by taking stock of the results achieved, and indicating how they might be pushed further.

Before getting underway, a final methodological remark. My aim is not to provide a full historical picture of Bataille and Heidegger's engagement with one another; rather, it is to create a distinctive perspective from which one can analyse certain aspects of their writing. In any case, the direct engagement between the two authors, despite the fact that their periods of activity and influence so overlap, is slender. Bataille's published texts often mention Heidegger in passing. For example, the 1954 version of *L'Expérience Intérieure* (*Inner Experience*) contains three such passages.ⁱⁱⁱ I discuss those of Bataille's published remarks which bear on the issues in play in section 2 below. There is also an unpublished collection of notes, dating from some point between 1934-1937, headed 'La Critique de Heidegger: Critique d'une philosophie du fascisme' ('Critique of Heidegger: Critique of a Philosophy of Fascism').^{iv} As the heading suggests, the main issue here is political, and whilst both Bataille's views on fascism and Heidegger's relation to it are, of course, of great interest, that is not the topic of this article. In any case, there would be obstacles to relying heavily on a document that is more jottings than draft: it is covered in material crossed out, and Bataille frequently uses heavily contested terms such as 'intentionality' with little or no explanation. As for Heidegger, there are, as far as I know, no direct references to Bataille in the more than one hundred volumes of published works; this is supported by the *Heidegger Concordance*, which indexes the entire *Gesamtausgabe* and also lists no entries for Bataille.^v Some commentators report a 1955 verbal remark by Heidegger identifying Bataille as 'der beste denkende Kopf Frankreichs'; these same commentators, however, also report Heidegger as having simply confused Bataille's name with Blanchot's.^{vi} In short, there is little direct textual engagement between Bataille and Heidegger. My aim will be to locate them in a shared conceptual and stylistic, rather than historical, space.

2. THE COMMON FEAR: TEXTS AND THINGS

In the hastily arranged War Emergency Semester of 1919, one finds Heidegger attempting to deal with a key challenge to his philosophical method: how can phenomenology – a reflective and highly theoretical procedure – analyse immediate, lived experience without thereby distorting it? The problem, as he sees it, is that philosophy all too easily leads to the 'Ent-leben' ('de-living') of the phenomena: in academic theorising about experience 'das spezifische Sein der Verhaltungen als solcher ausgestrichen ist' ('the specific being of behaviours as such is obliterated').^{vii} This threat is particularly acute for Heidegger himself.

On the one hand, he stressed the need for philosophy to immerse itself in the texture of the everyday world in order to escape the intellectualised approaches of both Husserl and neo-Kantianism (Ga56/57, p. 68). On the other hand, he wants to bolster, in the 1920s at least, the scientific and theoretical credentials of phenomenology: as he puts it the year after the publication of *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), ‘phenomenology’ is ‘der Titel für die Methode der wissenschaftlichen Philosophie überhaupt’ (‘the name for the method of scientific philosophy in general’) (Ga24, p. 3). Yet how can such a *theory* capture the intensity, the automaticity and the finegrain of our experiences, particularly the extreme experiences such as anxiety which Heidegger often focuses on?

This type of concern was extremely familiar to Bataille. Indeed, in his various remarks on Heidegger, it comes up time and again. Bataille’s accusation is that Heidegger offers an essentially academic epistemology: Heidegger’s philosophy is merely ‘un travail professoral’ (‘a professorial work’), in which experience is treated as a tool for the validation of a certain preconceived model of knowledge (OC V, p. 218; OC XI, p. 285). Yet, Bataille himself also harbours deep and closely related worries about his own writing. These worries are not formulated in the same polemical terms, but the kinship is close: Bataille is afraid that the act of writing will distort what he seeks to communicate. This is occasionally put in terms of the reader’s posture: how can one settle down to read Bataille’s texts as one might another book? (OE V, pp.49-50). Yet the dominant formulation is from Bataille’s own point of view: the risk is that writing renders servile the extreme states of which it speaks (OC XII, p. 341). Thus, ‘si nous vivons sans contester sous la loi du langage, ces états sont en nous comme s’ils n’étaient pas’ (‘if we live under the law of language without contesting it, these states are within us as if they didn’t exist’) (OC V, p. 27). Thus, exactly as Heidegger did, Bataille fears that his text will undermine the thoughts within it (OC VII, pp. 20-21).

The presence of these paradoxes in each of Bataille and Heidegger has been widely noted. So, for example, Derrida writes:

And one can already foresee in this prelude that the impossible meditated by Bataille will always have this form: how, after having exhausted the discourse of philosophy, can one inscribe in the lexicon and syntax of a language, our language, which was also the language of philosophy, that which nevertheless exceeds the oppositions of concepts governed by this communal logic?^{viii}

Likewise with respect to Heidegger, Dahlstrom speaks of a ‘paradox of thematisation’, of theorising.^{ix} But by bringing the two authors together, we can get a better handle on the *distinctive form* which this issue takes in their work. After all, some type of self-referential concern is present in much modern thought, and yet the details vary radically in different authors – the paradoxical structure of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, for example, is driven by concerns over nonsense and logical form, rather than a putative inability to do justice to lived experience.^x What unites Bataille and Heidegger, I will suggest, is a very specific version of the self-referential worry, one centred around the ‘chose’ or ‘Ding’ (‘thing’) and around the ‘objet’ or ‘Objekt’ (‘object’).

In supporting this, I will take Bataille first. For Bataille the threat posed by writing is one of ‘objectification’: ‘l’objectivation pure et simple’ (‘pure and straightforward objectification’) within ‘un système intellectuel’ (‘an intellectual system’) would annul or distort the character of the excremental object (OC II, p. 63). The danger, in short, is that writing will ‘objectify’ its content, failing to recognise that the sacred is ‘le plus purement opposé à la chose’ (‘most purely opposed to things’) (OC VII, p. 177). Bataille’s fears about his own practice are thus articulated within a very specific underlying framework, one in which the phenomena he values are threatened or closed down by ‘things’. For example:

A l’origine de la société industrielle, fondée sur le primat et l’autonomie de la marchandise, de la *chose*, nous trouvons une volonté contraire de placer l’essentiel – *ce qui effraie et ravit dans le tremblement* – en dehors du monde de l’activité, du monde des *choses*. (OC VII, p. 123 – original emphases).

(At the origin of industrial society, based on the primacy and autonomy of commodities, of *things*, we find a contrary impulse to place what is essential – *what causes one to tremble with fear and delight* – outside the world of activity, the world of *things*.)^{xi}

Here the domain of the sacred, Bataille’s concern, stands directly opposed to the profane ‘world of things’. By extension, it is the desire to escape the homogenous, profane dominance of things which leads him to stress phenomena such as human sacrifice.

Le sacrifice restitue au monde sacré ce que l'usage servile a dégradé, rendu profane.
L'usage servile a fait une *chose* (un *objet*) de ce qui, profondément, est de même nature que le *sujet*, qui se trouve avec le sujet dans un rapport de participation intime.
(OC VII, p. 61 – original emphases).

(Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the subject, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject).

The significance of sacrifice is thus precisely that it destroys people ‘en tant que choses, en tant qu'ils sont devenus des choses’ (‘as things, that is, insofar as they have become things’) (OC VII, p. 61 – original emphasis).^{xii} The problem, however, is that in *writing* on sacrifice, particularly when using a traditionally expository, progressive and ‘philosophical’ style, one risks forcing the phenomenon back into the ordered world of things and their instrumentality. Hence Bataille’s fear that texts such as *La part maudite* (*The Accursed Share*), themselves steady, stable, accumulative, serve to undermine the very thoughts they seek to express (OC VII, pp. 20-1).

If we now turn to Heidegger, a parallel pattern emerges. The key difficulty, he states, is how to study experience and yet ‘nicht heraustritt und sie zur Objektivität macht’ (‘without stepping outside it and making it in to some sort of objectivity’) (Ga59, pp. 171-172). Specifically, his concern is that philosophical writing and investigation might lead us into a particular ontology, an ontology of Dinge or Objekte.^{xiii} In SZ, the act of assertion is thus identified as a risk: it is liable to force everyday life, the focus of Heidegger’s analysis, into this ontological framework, reducing the famous carpenter’s hammer to a ‘Hammerding’ with ‘Eigenschaften’ (‘properties’) (SZ, p. 157). As he summarises:

Wir können uns diesen jetzt herausgestellten Tatbestand nicht oft und eindringlich genug vor Augen führen[...]daß der Bau des Dinges mit dem Bau der Aussage zusammenhängt. (Ga41, pp. 62–64; similarly Ga29/30, p. 419)

(We cannot bring this state of affairs too often and too emphatically before our eyes[...] the structure of the thing is connected with the structure of the assertion).

The danger, in sum, is that the philosophical statement decontextualises, desiccates, and rigidifies the experiences it seeks to capture: thus the risk of ‘Ent-leben’.^{xiv} For example, if we are to understand a ‘Zeichen’ (‘sign’) we must start by recognising that it is ‘nicht ein Ding, das zu einem anderen Ding in zeigender Beziehung steht’ (‘not a thing which stands to another thing in a relationship of indicating’) (SZ, p. 80). Likewise, to see the world as an ‘Objekt’ is to embrace a discredited philosophical framework in which scepticism can neither be dissolved nor resolved (SZ, p. 179).^{xv} The challenge, exactly as with Bataille, is to explain how Heidegger’s own practice of writing can avoid making precisely these errors. After all, he himself identifies philosophy as ‘theoretisch-begriffliche Interpretation’ (‘theoretical conceptual interpretation’) (Ga24, p. 15). As Kisiel puts it, the urgent problem for Heidegger is thus to find some ‘nonobjectifying language’.^{xvi}

By juxtaposing, Bataille and Heidegger, I have been able to identify both a common worry, and a common way of framing it. A full treatment of their relationship would need to deal with several further complexities. One is that the some of the ‘things’ which Bataille seeks to avoid are precisely those phenomena which Heidegger seeks to investigate: for example, structured, teleological labour. Consider one of Bataille’s attacks on communism:

Les communistes donnent toujours le pas à la *chose*, contre ce qui ose n'avoir pas son caractère subordonné...la charrue laboure le champ, le champ produit le blé, le blé nourrit le forgeron, qui forge la charrue. (OC VII, p. 134 – original emphasis).

(The communists always give precedence to *things*, as against that which dares not have their subordinate character...the plow ploughs the field, the field produces wheat, the wheat feeds the blacksmith, who forges the plow).

For Bataille, these patterns of instrumentality obscure and degrade the real target of his investigations, namely the sacred. For Heidegger, in contrast, such ‘means-end’ webs are exactly the positive phenomena which Division I of *Sein und Zeit* wants to analyse (SZ, p. 69; SZ, p. 73). This type of divergence is unsurprising; it flows from the fact that both authors ultimately have different intellectual goals – and this is not, of course, the place to try to deal with all the differences between them. Rather, what I want to emphasise is that there is nevertheless a clear, common strand within both Heidegger and Bataille which views ‘things’

negatively, and which stresses the need to escape from that framework, in order to re-engage with die Sache selbst as it is before the ‘de-living’ courted by philosophy. Indeed, for both, the threat posed by things is simultaneously a conceptual and a personal challenge: as Bataille puts it, ‘la résolution des problèmes de la vie’ (‘the solution to the problems of life’) lies in ‘ne pas être seulement une chose, mais d’être souverainement’ (‘not being merely a thing, but being in a sovereign manner’) (OC VII, pp. 124-125 – original emphasis; compare Ga59, pp.28-29).

3. THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE: TRANSFORMING WRITING

Both Bataille and Heidegger explore various tactics to deal with the dangers that their own philosophical writing poses to their projects. One shared strategy, for example, is to valorise silence. Thus Bataille talks of the culmination of Rimbaud’s work as coming at the moment when ‘il supprima la communication possible, il n’écrivit plus des poèmes’ (‘he suppressed possible communication, he no longer wrote poems’) (OC V, p. 64; similarly OC V, p. 82). Likewise, the Heideggerian call of conscience, which intervenes into the inauthentic life calling us to authenticity, ‘redet einzig und ständig im Modus des Schweigens’ (‘speaks only and constantly in the mode of silence’) (SZ, p. 273). Heidegger also appeals, particularly in the early 1920s to other methodological devices, such as ‘formale Anzeige’ (‘formal indication’) (for example Ga59, p. 85). Many of these devices play a far less prominent role by the time of *Sein und Zeit*, and I agree with commentators such as Blattner that they name the problem, rather than solving it.^{xvii} I want therefore to focus on the dominant narrative as to how Heidegger and Bataille respond to the methodological paradox of section 1 – according to this narrative, they escape the problems posed by writing through transforming the stylistic register in which such writing operates.

Let me stress immediately that I do not think that this is an inaccurate diagnosis. Both writers explicitly stress the need to shift beyond standard forms of philosophical discourse. In Heidegger, one finds in this context a persistent appeal to poetry and to a quasi-meditative ‘thought’. For example:

Die Befreiung der Sprache aus der Grammatik in ein ursprünglicheres Wesensgefüge ist dem Denken und Dichtung aufbehalten. (Ga9, p. 314)

(The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetry).

Bataille characteristically moves between praising poetry and animal screams within a few pages – yet both are meant to play the same role, creating an alternate channel through which the communication of experience might be possible (OC XI, p. 291,295). In Heidegger, such stylistic shifts are naturally read diachronically, as he moves away from the discursive ‘treatise’ form of texts such as *Sein und Zeit* and towards the compromised syntax and openly poetic stylisation of writings such as the *Beiträge*. In Bataille, in contrast, there is clearly a wide range of registers in operation from the start of his career, often within what is notionally a single volume.

The idea that such stylistic devices are an attempt to escape the paradox I sketched above is a familiar one. Heidegger himself talks of his earlier work as trapped by the prose and grammar of metaphysics (Ga14, p. 37). Similarly, on Derrida’s influential reading, what separates Bataillean sovereignty from Hegelian lordship is not the content of the concept, but the way in which the tensions, spasms and fractures across Bataille’s oeuvre and style progressively betray that concept into an unmeaning.^{xviii} As I said, I do not think that this dominant narrative is inaccurate. But I do think it is importantly incomplete. This is because there is another dimension to the two authors’ responses to the paradox of section 1 – a dimension that turns, ironically, on a positive role for the thing or object.

4. THE THING AS A VEHICLE FOR ‘PROFOUND COMMUNICATION’

In *L’Expérience Intérieure*, Bataille, faced with the paradoxes sketched in section 1, raises the possibility of an alternative mode of communication, ‘la communication profonde des êtres’ (‘profound communication between beings’) which might avoid the difficulties created by ‘discours’ (‘discourse’) (OC V:109). I will now argue that both Bataille and Heidegger appeal, at key points in their works, to the thing or object precisely as a facilitator of such communication. In developing this, I will begin with Heidegger – and there are two moments of his thought that I want to bring out.

The first is the discussion of the broken tool in *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger’s analysis here is directed at the ever present and so, he suggests, almost invisible teleological

connections which bind together the pre-theorised world of our everyday activity: the seamless switching from one context and one tool to another in pursuit of some inexplicit goal or aim. The example he gives is of constructing something, hammering it together, to protect against bad weather (SZ, pp. 84-85). Suppose in the course of this action that the hammer should break. Heidegger contends that this disruption would suddenly bring into stark relief the web of instrumental structures, previously assumed but inexplicit. As he puts it:

In einer Störung der Verweisung – in der Unverwendbarkeit für...wird aber die Verweisung ausdrücklich[...]Der Zeugzusammenhang leuchtet auf. (SZ, pp. 74-75)

(But when an assignment has been disturbed – when something is unusable for some purpose, then the assignment becomes explicit [...])The context of equipment is lit up).

The idea is that when the hammer breaks, it makes the now impaired teleological connections in which it stood strikingly salient (SZ, pp. 73-74). But what of the status of the hammer itself? Heidegger's answer is that in such moments of breakdown, it becomes manifest as an 'Zeugding' ('equipmental thing') (SZ, p. 73); suddenly unusable, its phenomenology is no longer straightforwardly that of tool, instead becoming at least in part an obstructive, material passivity. What is significant for current purposes is that, as the hammer switches from 'Zeug' to 'Zeugding', 'thing' serves a *positive* methodological role: it illuminates the phenomena which define our world by making the everyday instrumental structures which we all assume visible. In section 1 'thing' was used to articulate the negative consequences of a certain mode of communication, namely philosophical discourse. Here, in contrast, it serves to introduce what is in an important sense a distinctive communicative register: upon seeing the damaged tool-thing, one becomes aware of the teleological structures which *Sein und Zeit* seeks to highlight, and yet which written philosophy cannot discuss without distorting.

The broken tool of *Sein und Zeit* represents Heidegger's first attempt to find some solution to the problems of section 1 by appeal to a positive role for things. Yet there is a difficulty with the tactic, one noted in another context by Blattner.^{xix} Why, when the hammer breaks, do you not simply get another one, or get some glue, or go to the shops to buy a replacement or etc.? The problem is that it is hard to see why such instrumental disruption

should necessarily move one to any kind of awareness of instrumentality per se, or of the role of instrumental connections in making up the world – why don't you simply carry on seamlessly, with the need to procure another hammer simply added in as a further first order task? Of course, within a philosophical treatise, one might deliberately reflect on the case of equipment failure and draw the kind of general conclusions from it that Heidegger wants. But then those conclusions would be arrived at and disseminated within precisely the type of theoretical written context that Heidegger worries distorts experience – in other words, we would be back within the paradox sketched in section 1.

The second moment in Heidegger's work which I want to highlight comes in the 1951 essay *Das Ding* (*The Thing*). Just over fifteen years earlier, in the lecture course *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (*The Question of the Thing*), Heidegger had again condemned 'Dinge' as the reified symptom of a pernicious philosophical method, one aided and abetted by modern science (Ga41, pp. 62–64) – this is the negative use of 'Ding' mapped in section 1. By 1951, however, the situation has radically altered as Heidegger seeks to rehabilitate 'Ding' based on its Old Germanic heritage (Ga7, p. 176). 'Things' are thus now opposed to an atomic science which destroys them not only physically, but culturally:

Deren Explosion [the atom bomb's] ist nur die gröbste aller groben Bestätigungen der langher schon geschehenen Vernichtung des Dinges: dessen, daß das Ding als Dingnichtig bleibt. Die Dingheit des Dinges bleibt verborgen, vergessen. (Ga7, p. 172)

(Its explosion is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long since-accomplished annihilation of the thing: the confirmation that the thing as a thing remains nil. The thingness of the thing remains concealed, forgotten).

Most importantly of all, however, Heidegger here appeals to the thing as vehicle for a non-linguistic mode of communication. Describing the role of a jug as it pours, he writes:

Im Geschenk des Gusses weilen *zumal* Erde und Himmel, die Göttlichen und die Sterblichen [...]. [I]n diesem Fund gewahren wir zugleich das Wesen der Nähe. Das Ding dingt. Dingend verweilt es Erde und Himmel, die Göttlichen und die Sterblichen; verweilend bringt das Ding die Vier in ihren Fernen einander nahe [...].

Ding verweilt das Geviert in ein je Weiliges aus Einfalt der Welt. (Ga7, pp. 175;179;182 – original emphasis)

(In the gift of the outpouring earth and sky, divinities and mortals dwell together *all at once* [...]. [I]n this discovery we also catch sight of the nature of nearness. The thing things. In thinging, it stays earth and sky, divinities and mortals. Staying, the thing brings the four, in their remoteness, near to one another [...]. Each thing stays the fourfold into a happening of the simple oneness of world).

‘Ding’ is here presented as a point around which mortals and gods might bind: ‘[d]as Ding dingt. Das Dingen versammelt’ (‘[t]he thing things. Thinging gathers’) (Ga7, p. 175). Such ‘gathering’ sustains a non-linguistic communion, articulated in terms of proximity and unity: the thing explains ‘the nature of nearness’ because the practices associated with it model what it is for one individual to be bound with another within a shared experiential framework, within the ‘simple oneness of world’. Of course, there is much one might question about this aspect of Heidegger’s project – aesthetically, politically, conceptually. For example, this is a mode of unification that at times threatens to overwhelm the individuality of its participants: none of the parties so unified ‘*versteift sich auf sein gesondertes Besonderes*’ (‘insists on its own separate particularity’) (Ga7, p. 181). But what is important for current purposes is the use of ‘Ding’ to offer a potential solution to the problems of section 1: the thing, and the rituals linked it, suffice to sustain a binding between individuals that need not rely on language and the potential issues which language creates. In short, the vision is that a thing might sustain what Bataille called the ‘profound communication’ that philosophical writing supposedly imperils (OC V, p. 109).

I want now to move back to Bataille, reread in the context of this treatment of Heidegger. I argue that we can, as with Heidegger, identify two key points at which the thing or object becomes a vehicle for an alternative mode communication that seeks to evade the paradoxes of section 1. These two points are sacrifice and prostitution, and I treat them in turn.

As I noted in section 1, Bataille initially presents sacrifice as a procedure whereby people, animals, or resources are ‘destroyed as things’ (OC VII, p. 61). Yet, there is a vital sense in which Bataille’s model of sacrifice actually requires that the offering be preserved *as*

a thing. This is why he speaks of a ‘leurre’ (‘deception’) bound up in the practice (OC VII, pp. 123-124).

Un sacrifice ne peut poser qu'une *chose* sacrée. La *chose sacrée* extériorise l'intimité elle fait voir au dehors ce qui en vérité est au dedans. (OC VII, p. 178 – original emphasis).

(A sacrifice can only posit a *sacred thing*. The sacred thing externalizes intimacy: it makes visible on the outside that which is really within).

Despite the earlier talk of destruction, the model in play here is ultimately closer to a Hegelian *Aufhebung*: in sacrifice, the thing is simultaneously transcended and preserved. The reason for this is twofold. First, Bataillean sacrifice is necessarily a communal act. As French puts it:

Sacrifice, ritualised putting to death, implies a scene or spectacle of sacrifice in which death, the death of another, is witnessed by the sacrificial community (the group gathered around the sacrificial site).^{xx}

As such an act, it necessarily requires an external canvas, a physical entity around which it can coalesce, which ‘makes visible on the outside that which is really within’. Second, to experience death one must somehow stand on both sides of the boundary of dissolution.

Pour que l’homme à la fin se révèle à lui-même il devrait mourir, mais il lui faudrait le faire en vivant — en se regardant cesser d’être. (OC XII, p. 336).^{xxi}

(In order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living — watching himself ceasing to be).

The external canvas of which I spoke allows this impossibility to be achieved through a ‘representation’ or ‘spectacle’:

Dans le sacrifice, le sacrifiant s'identifie à l'animal frappé de mort. Ainsi meurt-il en se voyant mourir... Cette difficulté annonce la nécessité du *spectacle*, ou généralement de la *représentation*, sans la répétition desquels nous pourrions, vis-à-vis de la mort, demeurer étrangers, ignorants, comme apparemment le sont les bêtes. (OC XII, pp. 336-337 – original emphasis)

(In the sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that is struck down dead. And so he dies in seeing himself die... This difficulty proclaims the necessity of *spectacle*, or of *representation* in general, without the practice of which it would be possible for us to remain alien and ignorant in respect to death, just as beasts apparently are).

It is for these two, tightly linked, reasons that sacrifice requires a 'sacred thing'. We are able to escape from 'things' defined in terms of their instrumentality, their place in the restricted economy, only by appeal to things defined in terms of a mutually accessible external physicality. By extension, whilst the Bataillean philosophical text is itself trapped within a paradox, unable to exhibit the disorder and expenditure it valorises (OC VII, pp. 20-1), it is able to identify an alternative register of communication, one which hinges precisely on a positive role for the thing. As with Heidegger's jug, Bataille's 'sacred thing' – be it a pyre, a headless figure, a noose – supposedly makes possible an irreducible mode of communication and community among the group gathered around it.^{xxii}

In Heidegger's case, I argued that the first positive model of the 'thing', that of the broken tool, ultimately flowed back to a theoretical standpoint, and thus to the problems of section 1. Bataille's treatment of the sacrificial object does not lead to the same aporia: unlike the broken tool, the communicative dimension of sacrifice can function whether a theoretician notices it or not. But whilst the 'sacred thing' stands at the heart of the sacrifice, much of the work in Bataille's analysis is actually being done by other notions – in particular the idea of spectacle and of a group, charged with its own intensity and dynamics. I want therefore to introduce, as with Heidegger, a second case in which one can see more directly the thing's positive and distinctive communicative role. This second case is prostitution.

As Guerlac has emphasised, what separates human from animal sexuality for Bataille is an awareness of transgression: as she puts it, '[i]t is the play of signifying operations within

eroticism which distinguishes it from animal sexuality'.^{xxiii} Bataille himself articulates this by casting the thing or object at the centre of desire in semiotic terms.

En son premier mouvement, l'érotisme n'en est pas moins signifié par la position d'un *objet du désir*... Une jolie fille dénudée est parfois l'*image* de l'érotisme. L'objet du désir est différent de l'érotisme, ce n'est pas l'érotisme entier, mais l'érotisme en passe par lui. (OC X, pp. 129-130 – original emphasis)^{xxiv}

(In its initial movement eroticism is no less identified by the positioning of an *object of desire*... A pretty naked girl is sometimes the *image* of eroticism. The object of desire is different from eroticism; it is not eroticism in sum but eroticism passes through it).

As French notes, what is striking here is that:

The paradox of the erotic object is such that the movement of eroticism, which is the negation of the individual limits and objectivity of any object, is *signified by* ('*significatif de*...' OC X, p. 130) an erotic *object*.^{xxv}

Eroticism, despite its supposed dissolution of the boundaries of the object, thus relies on an object which plays a necessary significative role: it stands as the mirror in which we see ourselves and our violations reflected (OC X, p. 100). It is within this framework that I want to locate Bataille's treatment of prostitution. When discussing sacrifice, I argued that the 'thing', in the sense of a public, external, material canvas for the act, was integral to Bataille's account. This theme remains visible in Bataille's treatment of prostitution: the God of *Madame Edwarda*, for example, is introduced as a 'fille publique', perennially available to all (OC III, p. 12). Yet with the transition to prostitution, there is nevertheless an important conceptual shift: one may sacrifice resources or individuals or animals; whilst only other agents can serve as prostitutes. I want now to show how that connects to the idea of a positive methodological role for things or objects.

Bataille is clear that there is a fundamental link between the prostitute and the familiar web of notions such as sovereignty, excess, loss. Thus he thinks that the desire for prostitutes consecrates (OC X, p. 132). But it is also vital for him that the prostitute is both an 'object'

and a ‘thing’. For example, the prostitute and not the wife (Bataille’s terms are gendered), is erotically significant because the former is a dead object whereas the latter remains within the ‘mouvement général de la vie’ (‘general movement of life’) (OC VIII, p. 130). He writes – and I want to stress especially the second sentence:

Mais c’est vrai à l’extrême, au sommet, si la prostitution fait d’une femme offerte un objet mort, mieux le point mort du déchaînement des passions. *Il est nécessaire en effet qu’un être soit envisagé comme une chose afin que le désir compose une figure qui lui réponde.* (OC VIII, p. 124 – emphasis added).

(But this is true at the extreme limit, at the apex, if prostitution makes an offered woman into a dead object, or more exactly, the dead point of the passionate outburst. *It is necessary in fact that an individual be regarded as a thing if desire is to compose the figure that corresponds to it.*)

The prostitute is thus significant to Bataille because she is aligned with a dead object or thing. The concept of ‘thing’ in play in such passages is twofold. First, the prostitute, and later the corpse, simultaneously mirrors and undermines the ‘general movement of life’ by presenting a human body, something typically so bound up with that movement and so hedged around by principles of individuation, as instead outside such structures, lying rotting or collapsing or immobile. The thought here is a radicalisation of the familiar Bataillean hope that sex subverts the status and coherence of agency: recall, for example, the fantasised glimpse of the distinguished hostess transmuted in sex to a ‘chienne enragée’ (‘mad bitch’) (OC X, pp. 106-107). Second, and this is where the prostitute/corpse doublet shifts beyond the bitch, the prostitute or the corpse stand outside the ‘movement of life’ not simply by displacing it into more frenzied register, but by embodying a profoundly blank passivity which makes them mere ‘things’. It is not simply that ‘personnalité’ (‘personality’) is dead whilst the bitch lives (OC X, pp. 106-107), but that the object of desire has become nothing more than ‘the dead point of the passionate outburst’. It is in virtue of this matt passivity, the glassy malleability of the object, that the prostitute can play the disruptive role that Bataille assigns her.^{xxvi} Thus Madame Edwarda has ‘la simplicité inintelligible d’une pierre’ (‘the unintelligible simplicity of a stone’), as ‘les yeux morts, elle se laissait faire’ (‘with eyes dead, she offered no resistance’) (OC III, p. 24; 30). The natural consequence of this structure will be tendency to

privilege necrophilia: thus Troppmann's observation that 'les prostituées avaient pour moi un attrait analogue à celui des cadavres' ('my attraction to prostitutes was like my attraction to corpses') (OC III, p. 407). Yet, there remains enough in Bataille of the Hegelian idea that no object can efface itself as fully as another agent can; that even a stone or a corpse maintains an impenetrable, inappropriable core.^{xxvii} It is because of this counter pressure that texts such as *Le Bleu du Ciel* (*The Blue of Noon*) switch between avowing necrophilia, and a conceptually, and not merely pragmatically, distinct desire for sex with someone pretending to be dead, namely the prostitute. Thus Lazare responds to Troppmann by suggesting that Dirty should play the part of the dead woman (OC III, p. 407).^{xxviii}

In sum, the Bataillean prostitute is a blankly passive dead weight whose form nevertheless mirrors *and* mocks that appearance which is most actively associated with the 'movement of life'. It is this which communicates to the individual who uses her that awareness of transgression supposedly crucial to an experience of the sacred. In other words, the prostitute acquires methodological significance for Bataille precisely because, qua thing, she offers:

Ce que j'ai voulu: la communication profonde des êtres à l'exclusion des liens nécessaires aux projets, que forme le discours. (OC V, p. 109)

(What I wanted: profound communication between beings to the exclusion of the links necessary to projects, which discourse forms).

5. CONCLUSION

My claim in this article has been that by juxtaposing Bataille and Heidegger, we can acquire a better understanding of two shared dynamics in their work. The first is a particular methodological anxiety, an anxiety surrounding philosophical writing: I have shown how this anxiety is framed in both authors in terms of a negative discourse about 'things' or 'objects'. The second common dynamic is a countervailing tendency to appeal, ironically, to things or objects in order to sustain an alternative form of communication, one that might evade writing's difficulties. Thus Bataille's solution to the threat of things is to valorise a death, feigned or real, that makes mere objecthood, mere thinghood, all the starker, whilst

Heidegger comes to privilege the very terms such as ‘*Ding*’ which he had earlier warned against.

There are several angles along which one might further develop these results. For example, Bataille’s emphasis on the prostitute’s passivity meshes closely with the Sadean fantasy in which the object of desire must be prey to all that might be visited upon it.

[L]a passivité est en elle-même une réponse à l’exigence du désir. L’objet du désir doit en effet se borner à ne plus exister pour soi-même mais pour le désir de l’autre. (OC VIII, p. 124)^{xxix}

([P]assivity is in itself a response to desire’s insistence. The object of desire must in fact restrict itself to being nothing more than this response; that is, it must no longer exist for itself but for the other’s desire.)

Alternately, with respect to Heidegger, one might focus on why exactly he thinks that writing, and even mere assertion (SZ, p. 166), stands at constant risk of ‘de-living’ experience.^{xxx} Finally, one might consider whether a stronger result is attainable, at least in the case of Bataille, than the one I pressed for here. I argued that the dominant narrative on which a shift in writing style is the key device for avoiding the paradoxes of section 1 needs to be supplemented by what one might call an ‘ontic’ story, a story that emphasises the methodological role of the thing or object in contexts such as sacrifice. Yet as Bataille himself hints, one could push this further: perhaps the stylistic shifts are themselves to be seen as instances of that ontic, sacrificial motif.

De la poésie, je dirai maintenant qu’elle est, je crois, le sacrifice où les mots sont victimes. (OC V, p. 156)^{xxxi}

(Of poetry, I will now say that it is, I believe, the sacrifice in which words are victims.)

Notes

ⁱ There are, of course, innumerable points on which Bataille and Heidegger might be profitably compared, but in order to keep the focus sharp, I will confine the comparison here to the specific issues introduced in section 1. For some recent discussions of other aspects of the relationship between Heidegger and Bataille see: Rebecca Comay, ‘Gifts without Presents: Economies of ‘Experience’ in Bataille and Heidegger’, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 66-89; Andrew Ryder, ‘Bataille against Heidegger: Language and the Escape from the World’, *Studies in Social & Political Thought*, 19 (2011), 71-85; and Stefanos Geroulanos, ‘The Anthropology of Exit: Bataille on Heidegger and Fascism’, *October*, 117 (2006), 3-24.

ⁱⁱ I am not going to discuss Heidegger’s use of ‘Gegenstand’ here. Whilst he sometimes employs the word comparatively neutrally, as one might talk in English of ‘the object of discussion’ (see, for example, SZ, p. 27), his usage of it and its cognates is closely tied to his dialogue with Kant (see Ga3, p. 119). Treatment of it would thus require a discussion of that relationship, something which take us too far off course.

ⁱⁱⁱ *L’Expérience Intérieure* in *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-89), Vol. V, p. 19;37;128. Subsequent references to the *Oeuvres Complètes* will be given in the main body of the article using the standard format of abbreviations by volume and page. The abbreviations will be as follows:

| | |
|---------|---|
| OC II | <i>Écrits posthumes, 1922–1940</i> |
| OC III | <i>Œuvres littéraires: Madame Edwarda - Le Petit – L’Archangélique - L’Impossible - La Scissiparité - L’Abbé C. - L’être différencié n’est rien - Le Bleu du ciel</i> |
| OC V | <i>La Somme athéologique I</i> |
| OC VII | <i>L’économie à la mesure de l’univers - La Part maudite - La limite de l’utile (Fragments) - Théorie de la Religion - Conférences 1947-1948 – Annexes</i> |
| OC VIII | <i>L’Histoire de l’érotisme - Le surréalisme au jour le jour - Conférences 1951-1953 - La Souveraineté – Annexes</i> |
| OC X | <i>L’érotisme - Le procès de Gilles de Rais - Les larmes d’Eros</i> |
| OC XI | <i>Articles I, 1944–1949</i> |
| OC XII | <i>Articles II, 1950–1961</i> |

^{iv} The document itself is held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France Georges Bataille Archive, 4.XXVI. I have only been able to access it in the translation by Geroulanos that appeared as ‘Critique of Heidegger’, *October*, 117 (2006), pp. 25-34.

^v François Jaran and Christophe Perrin, *The Heidegger Concordance*, 3 Vols. (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

^{vi} For example, Bernd Mattheus, *Georges Bataille: Eine Tanatographie* (Munich: Matthes und Seitz, 1998), Vol 2, p. 188.

^{vii} *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie* in the *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975 -), Vol.56/57, p. 74. . Subsequent references to the *Gesamtausgabe* will be given in the main body of the article using the standard format of abbreviations by volume and page, with the exception of *Sein und Zeit*, where I use the standard text and pagination (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1957). The abbreviations will be as follows:

| | |
|-----|---|
| SZ | <i>Sein und Zeit</i> (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1957) |
| Ga5 | <i>Holzwege</i> (1977) |

| | |
|---------|--|
| Ga7 | <i>Vorträge und Aufsätze</i> (200) |
| Ga9 | <i>Wegmarken</i> (1976) |
| Ga14 | <i>Zur Sache des Denkens</i> (2007) |
| Ga24 | <i>Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie</i> (1997) |
| Ga29/30 | <i>Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik</i> (1983) |
| Ga41 | <i>Die Frage nach dem Ding</i> (1984) |
| Ga56/57 | <i>Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie</i> (1987) |
| Ga59 | <i>Phaenomenologie der Anschauung und des Ausdrucks</i> (1993) |

^{viii} Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 319. The original is from Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), p. 367:

Et l'on pressent déjà, en ce prélude, que l'impossible médité par Bataille aura toujours cette forme: comment, après avoir épuisé le discours de la philosophie, inscrire dans le lexique et la syntaxe d'une langue, la nôtre, qui fut aussi celle de la philosophie, ce qui excède néanmoins les oppositions de concepts dominées par cette logique commune?

^{ix} Daniel Dahlstrom, *Heidegger's Concept of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 433-434.

^x Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 2001), 6.54.

^{xi} Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own, although I have consulted the standard versions.

^{xii} Similarly OC XI, p. 103

^{xiii} I am not going to discuss Heidegger's use of 'Gegenstand' here: please see note ii above.

^{xiv} Heidegger is still willing at this juncture to use 'Erlebnis' positively; his claim is that 'thing experience' is a derivative, distortion of our original *Erlebnis* of the world (Ga56/57, p. 90).

^{xv} Heidegger's use of 'presence-at-hand' is deeply conflicted, but his early work typically equates it with 'things' or 'objects': for explicit instances see Ga41, p. 33; SZ, p. 132; SZ, p. 204. Insofar as his avowed purpose is to escape the dominance of a present-at-hand ontology, this further testifies to the negative force which these concepts carry for him. I discuss these issues further in Sacha Golob, 'Heidegger on Assertion, Method and Metaphysics', *European Journal of Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1111/ejop.12018.

^{xvi} Theodore Kisiel, 'The Demise of Being and Time: 1927-1930', in *Heidegger's Being and Time* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), edited by Richard Polt, pp. 189-214 (p. 192).

^{xvii} William Blattner, 'Ontology, the a Priori and the Primacy of Practice', in *Transcendental Heidegger*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), edited by Jeff Malpas and Steven Crowell, pp. 10-27 (p. 239n46).

^{xviii} Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 338.

^{xix} William Blattner, 'Decontextualization, Standardization and Deweyan Science', *Man and World*, 28 (1995), pp.321-339 (pp. 325-326).

^{xx} Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille : Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (Leeds: Legenda, 2007), p. 63.

^{xxi} The interaction between first and third person perspectives on 'death' is also vital to Heidegger: see, for example, SZ, p. 240 and SZ, p. 263. However, there are too many other factors in play in this aspect of Heidegger's thought to make it a useful locus of comparison here: one is the complex relationship between this

first and third person divide and the inauthenticity/authenticity distinction, another is that the degree of similarity between Heidegger's notion of 'death' and our ordinary understanding of the term is highly contested.

^{xxii} As one can see from the remark just cited, Bataille talks of this communication in terms of '*représentation*'.

One interesting area for further research would be the similarities and differences between his usage of that term and Heidegger's deeply conflicted view of '*Vorstellung*'.

^{xxiii} Suzanne Guerlac, 'Recognition by a Woman!', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), pp. 90-106 (p. 104).

^{xxiv} One line for further development here would be to juxtapose Bataille's conception of the image, which emerges partly from his dialogue with Blanchot, with Heidegger's own. As is well-known, Heidegger places particular emphasis on the image in his deconstruction of the canon (for example, *Ga5*, p. 89). Another possibility would be to explore the degree to which Bataille's notion of an image meshes with his simultaneous reliance on, and destruction of, an apparatus of subjectivity.

^{xxv} ffrench, *After Bataille*, p. 157.

^{xxvi} Again, I follow Bataille's gendering of terms.

^{xxvii} Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §175.

^{xxviii} For an extremely interesting recent discussion of Bataille's sexual stylisation of death in relation not to the object of desire, but to the narrator, see Shane Weller, 'Decomposition: Georges Bataille and the Language of Necrophilia' in *Modernist Eroticisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) edited by Anna Schaffner and Shane Weller, pp. 169-194.

^{xxix} Compare Bataille's discussion of Sade, which deliberately fuses his own terminology with the Sadean fantasy (OC VIII, p. 153). By extension, there is a sense in which the sovereign state is one in which you are conscious of nothing: there is nothing to exert any limitation to your will (OC VII, p. 178).

^{xxx} I discuss this in detail in Golob, 'Heidegger on Assertion, Method and Metaphysics'.

^{xxxi} I am greatly indebted to Patrick ffrench, Michael Silk, and to the editors and referees of this journal for a number of extremely helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank the audience of the 2014 Bataille workshop at the University of the West of England for their responses to an earlier version of this material.